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Berkeley Art Museum Show Highlights African American Quilters

A 'transformative' gift from an Oakland collector brought thousands of hidden gems to light and 100 quilts by 80 quiltmakers are showcased here

By **Elizabeth Fishel** | November 25, 2025 | **History and Memories**

The recent show, "Routed West" at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) in Berkeley, California is a visual feast of color and pattern, craft and history.

The exhibit showcases 100 vibrant, dazzling quilts by 80 different creators — familiar patterns like Double Wedding Rings, Log Cabin, Star of Bethlehem and improvisational quilts, jaunty as jazz, where the makers ad-libbed as they went along. An example is Sherry Byrd's "Medallion," used to advertise the show: two bright orange squares here, five luminous cobalt-blue squares there, several yolk-yellow pieces to set the others off. The effect is a resounding wow: original, ingenious and eye-popping.

"Routed West" | Credit: Chris Grunder/ Courtesy of BAMPFA

Rediscovering Unknown Artists

The common thread weaving the pieces together is that all the quilters are African American women and a few men, mostly unknown and unsung until now. According to the exhibit's curator, Elaine Yau, in an interview with Next Avenue, "A big part of the show is trying to resist the erasure of Black women artists and their legacies." Like the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers of Alabama whose talents were undiscovered until the early 2000s — and then hailed in the New York Times as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced" — the quiltmakers in the BAMPFA show labored in obscurity for decades.

> "A big part of the

None of these gifted artists went to art school — they were all self-taught or learned to quilt from their elders.

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Many raised large families and held other jobs — nurses, librarians, cooks – but their artwork is now getting the attention and respect it deserves. The exhibit makes the effort to highlight the quiltmakers as well as the quilts by attributing every textile to its creator and sharing their biographies and personal photos in the catalogue.

Per the show's title and theme, "Routed West," at least a quarter of the makers began quilting in the South — primarily Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas – and brought their warm and distinctive bedcoverings with them when they migrated westward to California. They were part of what's known as the Second Great Migration that took place from the 1940s to the 1970s and were among the hundreds of thousands of African American Southerners who came to California searching for economic opportunity and freedom from racial violence. As Yau put it, "The quilts served as a way to preserve memory and a connection to home."

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A Transformative Bequest

Even if you don't get to see the show in person, its backstory is noteworthy in itself: the exhibit grew from the largest bequest of African American quilts ever made to a museum, almost 3000 pieces in 2019 — a "transformative" gift in Yau's words. The donor was a Berkeley psychologist and self-taught quilt expert, Eli Leon. Leon's bequest was a surprise, and a

hugely welcome one, that came following his death and without prior announcement.

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"Eli was quite a singular and idiosyncratic individual," observed Yau. Born in the Bronx in 1935 to Lithuanian Jewish parents, he had a progressive education at Black Mountain College and Reed College and got his master's in psychology at the University of Chicago. He moved to Oakland and became part of the counterculture in the late '60s and '70s, practicing as a Reichian therapist.

He started to collect quilts in 1981, at first finding them at flea markets and thrift stores, and eventually buying directly from the artists themselves, focusing on what he came to realize was a long tradition of African American quilt making.

"Routed West" | Credit: Chris Grunder/ Courtesy of BAMPFA

Leon was not a wealthy man, but he chose to use the resources he had to build his collection. He paid between $5 and $300 for each quilt, sufficient for some of the quilters, later considered "lowballing" to others. He lived in a modest, one-bedroom shingled home in Oakland where his quilts and other collections like vintage aprons were piled floor to ceiling.

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One of the quilters represented in the show, Bara Byrd-Stewart, 50, remembered Leon as a "tiny man with a small face and a beard and a tiny voice." Recalling a visit as a young girl to his house with her mother and grandmother, she remarked, "You had to move sideways down the hall. He was a hoarder, but a hoarder of quilts." Leon preserved thousands of quilts, brought them into the limelight, and helped secure their reputation as a revered art form.

In 1989, Leon received a Guggenheim fellowship to support his collecting trips to the South; he also researched and wrote about quilts and organized several exhibits of his collection before his death, but none on the scale of the current BAMPFA show.

> **"She used old dresses of mine and shirts from my father. She was recycling before recycling was a**

Repurposing Fabric

"The quilts themselves are symbolic of cultural resilience and cultural survival,"Yau said. Originally made as "functional objects," the quilts are also a "metaphor for the role of preservation, of how they're enmeshed in everyday life, and therefore in everyday stories and

> **word."**

personal family histories." For frugality's sake in the often impoverished rural areas where the makers lived, many of the quilts in the show were pieced from re-purposed fabrics including flour sacks, denim blue jeans, hardy work clothes, even from a bag of old ties and the material from a suit sample book that became a muted "Four Patch Log Cabin" quilt from the 1930s, all somber browns and grays.

"Routed West" | Credit: Chris Grunder/ Courtesy of BAMPFA

"My mother never bought new fabric for her quilts," said Ora Clay, 80, a contemporary quilter in the show who moved from Alabama to Oakland when she was 16. "She used old dresses of mine and shirts from my father. She was recycling before recycling was a word." Clay is a member of Oakland's African American Quilters Guild whose work is also represented in a special gallery in the exhibit, emphasizing the endurance of the African American tradition among 21st century women.

One distinctive re-purposed quilt was pieced together from the little white and blue bags that once held smoking tobacco. The quilter, Annie Crawford, worked on it over seven years, 1933-40, in her hometown of Call, Texas, gathering these little sacks from relatives at family events until she had 500 of them. Then she stitched them together in alternating blue and white squares that she filled with cotton batting, so they puffed. Eventually she

gifted the quilt to her niece and other relatives who kept it in Berkeley where Leon bought it.

Four Generations of Quilters

If transmission of cultural values and continuity between generations are important throughlines of the exhibit, then a stand-out illustration is a grouping of quilts made by four generations in a Texas-to-California-and back to Texas family; three of the four are the only quilters from Leon's collection who are still alive.

> **"I love the fact that it's termed art. It's amazing. We were all blown away."**

There's the late matriarch Gladys Henry who's represented by a charming heart-shaped hooked rug and a sophisticated, surprisingly modern Double Medallion quilt with fabric strips of inky blue, black, rose and green. Her daughter Laverne Brackens, 98, won a prestigious National Heritage Fellowship for her lifetime of quilting. Laverne's daughter, Sherry Brackens-Byrd, 74, the family historian who learned to quilt from grandma Gladys, took up the craft at 32 to cope with her grief after having a stillborn child, and eventually, as the mother of eight, used it as her "getaway moment." And one of Sherry's daughters, Bara Byrd Stewart, began quilting at age seven or eight by sewing together the scraps from her mother's leftovers.

Bryd Stewart's lively, brightly colored quilt in the exhibit – all yellows, pinks and turquoises and called "Medallion, Broken Dishes Variation"—dates from 1988 and shows her signature style of a central square and balanced borders on top and bottom. Bryd Stewart was about 14 and living in Richmond, California when she made it; once the family moved back to Texas when she was 20, she stopped quilting. Now with her only daughter off to college, she's taken out her sewing machine and started collecting materials again. In an interview, she said, "The desire is there."

Brackens-Byrd and her daughter Byrd Stewart both made the trip from Texas to see the show when it opened in Berkeley in June. It was an eye-opening peak experience, the first time they'd seen four generations of the family's handmade treasures all assembled in one place.

"Routed West" | Credit: Chris Grunder/ Courtesy of BAMPFA

"It was awesome," said Byrd Stewart. "This was something that everybody else enjoyed that I enjoyed creating. I love the fact that it's termed art. It's amazing. We were all blown away."

Seeing her family tree of quilts all displayed together allowed her mother, Brackens-Byrd, to reflect on the long view: "My mother is still quilting at 98. She's tutoring her home health nurse now to make quilts. They hurry through the necessities to get to the quilting. Considering her age, there's not much time left. I hope she keeps quilting to the end."

Editor's note: "Routed West" is open until November 30 and will be traveling to other museums next year. Check the website for updates.

Elizabeth Fishel is the author of five nonfiction books including *Sisters* and *Getting To 30: A Parent's Guide to the 20-Something Years* (with Jeffrey Arnett). She has contributed to numerous magazines including Vogue, Ms., New York, The Writer, and Oprah's O. She has written for Next Avenue since 2014. Read More

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